

Winter Fun

in missouri state Parks

story and photographs
by Tom Uhlenbrock



Hikers, bikers and runners enjoy the snowy landscape at Castlewood State Park.

Dawn brought a sparkling surprise. Six inches of fluffy snow covered the front yard, piling high on the limbs of the blue spruce. Temperatures above freezing and a full sun in a cloudless sky would make quick work of this short-lived wintry spectacle.

I grabbed my gear, packed a couple of PB&J sandwiches, and was out the door be-

fore the rest of the house had stirred. A note gave my destination, and planned arrival back home.

I was headed to one of Missouri's prettiest parks, which would be stunning in this pristine mantle of white.

Hawn State Park is an hour's drive south from my home in St. Louis, on the west side of Interstate 55 from Ste. Genevieve in



The bluffs along the River Scene Trail at Castlewood State Park display a panoramic view of the Meramec River and surrounding wintry landscape of St. Louis County.

southeast Missouri. The park was open, but the plows were not yet out and the gate was still closed across the snow-covered road that led down into the valley.

I parked and began hiking, leaving behind the first human prints in the fresh snow, which already was crisscrossed with the tracks of deer and other wildlife residents. The early morning light slanting through the trees created a maze of shadows in the woods.

For me, the hiking season begins at first frost in the fall and extends through the bloom of the last woodland wildflowers in late May. The very first snow of the hiking season is like the sudden report of a starter's gun – I'm off and walking.

Hawn is a park for all seasons. Wild azaleas and yellow lady-slipper orchids bloom in the spring. The sand-bottomed pools in its shut-ins are perfect for a cool dip in summer. The mix of pines and hardwoods put on a gaudy show in the fall. A snowfall in winter brings a quiet peace to the valley.

With sandstone bluffs, which drip with ice sculptures in winter, and the largest stand of short-leaf pines in the state park

system, Hawn often looks more like Colorado than the Missouri Ozarks.

The park's 9.75-mile Whispering Pines Trail is the best full-day hike in Missouri. But I was content to wander along the short Pickle Creek Trail and enjoy the snow piled high on the granite boulders as the dark, clear water swirled round. Tiny, intricate ice formations clung to the rocks just above the waterline, reminding me of the delicate lace doilies that decorated Grandma's living room chairs.

Cold-weather hiking takes a few precautions. Perspiration can soak your clothes and cause a chill. The first layer should be synthetic underwear that wicks away moisture. Then add layers, maybe a fleece vest, with a wind-breaking shell on the outside. Gloves and a wool hat are necessities to help regulate body heat. Waterproof boots are a must.

If wind chills approach zero, every inch of skin should be protected. A couple of items that take very little room in a backpack can prove a necessity in the worst of weather. Outdoor shops sell chemical packets to warm the fingers and toes. And a



(Above) Pickle Creek Trail follows the scenic shut-ins at Hawn State Park.

(Below) A snowy hike along Pickle Creek encountered only one other hiker on the trail.

fleece balaclava weighs next to nothing but is a full hood that leaves only the eyes exposed.

I spent three hours roaming, and photographing, the winter wonders of Pickle Creek. The only sounds were the tumbling of the water through the rocks and the calls of cardinals, titmice, blue jays and various species of woodpecker.

I was startled to hear the crunching of an approaching hiker. We nodded, without breaking the silence of the solitary experience.

Find your winter hike experience on Jan. 1. Missouri State Parks, a division of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, is encouraging people to get outside this winter by celebrating the New Year with a guided “First Day Hike” in

a state park. Visit mostateparks.com to see which parks are sponsoring hikes, and the schedules. America’s State Parks is promoting the Jan. 1 outing in all 50 state park systems.

Missouri, which has been voted “the best trails state” by American Trails, a national hiking organization, has more than 230 trails in 58 parks and historic sites. A guide to all of them, “*Trails of Missouri State Parks*,” is available at mostateparks.com and helps visitors choose a trail based on their needs and skill levels.

Here are five more state park trails that are a sure cure for cabin fever:

River scene trail, Castlewood State Park in St. Louis County:

This 3.25-mile trail may give the biggest bang for the buck of any trail in the state. Going clockwise, I start at the middle trailhead, which crosses a field and follows the bank of the Meramec River through the bottomlands of giant sycamores. Migrating geese sometimes rest on the gravel bars.

The trail climbs a wood stairway to come back along bluffs 200 feet above the river. There are several overlooks that provide stunning panoramic views of the landscape. A bonus may be an eyeball-to-eyeball look at the bald eagles that are permanent residents of the valley.

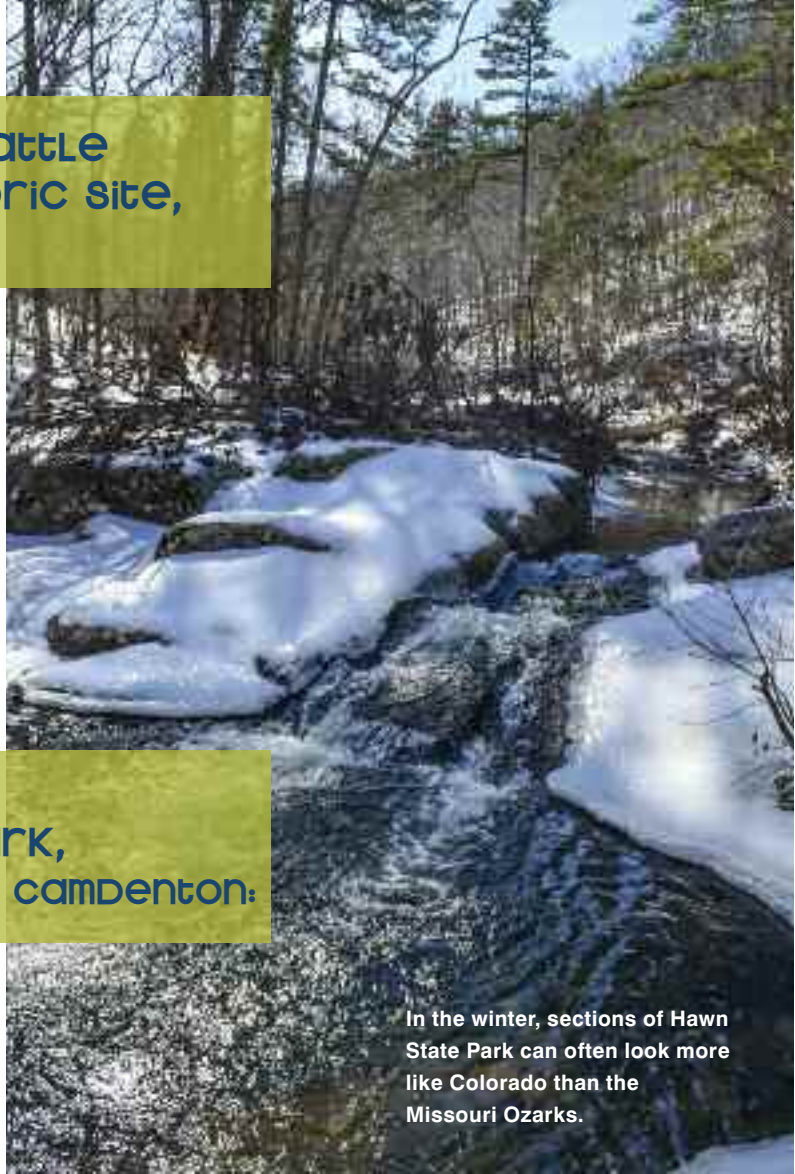


SNOW TRILLIUM TRAIL, BATTLE OF ATHENS STATE HISTORIC SITE, NORTH OF KAHOKA:

The park sits on the Des Moines River and is best known for a Civil War battle fought there in 1861.

However, the two-mile looping trail is especially beautiful in winter when the leaves are off the trees, allowing for a better view of the geology and the river valley.

“You could see a dozen to two dozen bald eagles along the bluffs,” said Jerry Toops, park superintendent of the historic site. “When it gets really cold, and the river freezes, they’ll move south to find open water near the dams.”



COLOSSEUM TRAIL, HA HA TONKA STATE PARK, FIVE MILES SOUTHWEST OF CAMDENTON:

The short trail shows off some of the park’s geologic wonders, including a natural bridge and the Colosseum Sinkhole.

“You get a completely different perspective of the park when the foliage is off the trees,” said park naturalist Larry Webb.

In the winter, sections of Hawn State Park can often look more like Colorado than the Missouri Ozarks.



Snow, sun and solitude at Hawn State Park.



Gans Creek Wild Area Trail System, Rock Bridge Memorial State Park, near Columbia:

“The trail has some higher elevations where you get views of the castle ruins across the ridge, and there’s the potential of seeing ice forming on the walls of the steep sinkhole.”

Some 8.5 miles of trail run through the 750-acre wild area, allowing hikers to enter a wilderness setting close by the city.

“You get to see a lot more of the karst topography when the leaves aren’t on the trees,” said Superintendent Jim Gast. “It’s a lot easier to see the deer and turkey in the wintertime.”

“There are places where you can’t see TV towers, water towers or any manmade structures. There are 110-foot bluffs, and caves that you can poke your head into. We get many visitors each year, but most of them haven’t discovered the wild area. It’s pretty peaceful back there.”

For more information, visit mostateparks.com.



Gayfeather Trail, Prairie State Park, Mindenmines:

Short-eared owls are among the winter residents of the park’s 4,000 acres of tallgrass prairie. So is a herd of some 100 bison.

“One year, there were 12 to 15 short-eared owls sitting along the gravel road,” said Brian Miller, the park manager. “It’s neat to see the snow pile up on a bison’s back. The thick wool insulates it up there, and doesn’t allow heat to get outside and melt the snow.”

“You’ve got a broad range of viewscapes all along the park. Usually, there are some areas, back a ways from everybody else, where you can see and feel what the original prairie was like.”

Tom Uhlenbrock is a writer for Missouri State Parks, a division of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

A St. Louis running club races on a sunny winter day at snowy Castlewood State Park.